

So Long, Florida Weed Men

By Dennis Giardina

If there was going to be a Mt. Rushmore of upland weed control pioneers in Florida, two of the big stone heads would have to be Greg Jubinsky and Drew Leslie. Being in Florida, I know that we'd have to build the mountain in which to sculpt their likenesses, or repurpose an old landfill mound (just kidding, guys!). Drew and Greg are the architects of the Uplands Program of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Invasive Plant Management Section. This program annually funds five to ten million dollars of invasive plant control on public lands across the State of Florida and they ran it for fifteen years. Both of them were also involved with the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council right from the beginning. Greg and Drew decided to retire a couple of months ago, a little earlier than originally planned, from their 30+ year careers in wildland weed control. I thought now might be a good time to ask them to talk a little about themselves and their careers.

The Uplands Program was established in 1997 to address the need for a statewide coordinated approach to the terrestrial (vs. aquatic) invasive exotic plant problem. The Upland Program funds individual exotic plant removal projects on public conservation lands statewide through a system of contracts with public agencies and cost-effective private weed control contractors. Once a year public land managers are invited to develop an exotic plant treatment proposal for their site. They write up a scope of work, using a template provided, and present their proposed weed control project to one of eleven Regional Invasive Plant Working Groups. Each Working Group ranks all the projects using an evaluation form that helps them determine a score. Ranked projects are then considered for funding by the Uplands Program based upon the order of priority. These project ranking meetings are the purest examples of democracy in action that I've ever witnessed. If you would like to read more about the Uplands Program, see *Wildland Weeds* Summer 2007 (available online at www.se-eppc.org).

I have used the names Drew and Greg together so much over the years that I can hardly mention one without the other (think Abbot and Costello or Laurel and Hardy). I wondered how their partnership began and found out it started in the mid-1970s when they came together to work on the evaluation of triploid (sterile) grass carp as biological control agents for submersed aquatic weeds, particularly hydrilla (*Hydrilla verticillata*). They would measure hydrilla infestation levels, then experiment with stocking rates of the sterile grass carp and analyze the results. They did this successfully on half a dozen lakes in Central Florida and that research led to the first large-scale stocking of triploid grass carp for weed control in the U.S., which took place just south of Orlando in Lake Conway. Drew in particular did a lot of promoting for the use of grass carp for weed control by traveling around the state, talking to aquatic weed managers and their agencies



Drew Leslie (left) and Greg Jubinsky

about the results of their research and the potential benefits of using triploid grass carp as part of an effective integrated pest management strategy.

Drew and Greg have shared an office wall for over 30 years. When Greg was selected to be the Research Program Leader of the (then) Department of Environmental Protection's Bureau of Invasive Plant Management in the early 1980s, Drew was the program's lead scientist and they were given pretty much *carte blanche* to recommend funding for pertinent weed control research or provide support for existing weed control studies. They initiated partnerships most notably with the University of Florida – IFAS and USDA – APHIS scientists, assisting them by helping to fund their invasive plant research, especially the testing of herbicide efficacy and the development of biological control organisms. Opposites attract; you hear it all the time and it does seem that most successful partnerships have involved people who want to accomplish the same goal but who would never think to do it the same way. That certainly holds true for Greg and Drew. Greg has always been focused on results in the sense that if something seems to be working, that's good enough for him. Drew's perspective is more scientific; if something seems to be working, he has to be able to explain how and why.

Twenty-five years ago while Drew and Greg were overseeing a multi-year research project on water hyacinth control on the St. Marks River, they both became more convinced of the need for more state-funded upland weed control. They started to push for the creation of an upland weed control program that would do Aldo Leopold proud by using his ethical litmus test: i.e., if a land management action "tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of a biotic community," then it is correct. They built a case for it and in the mid-1990s they were given a provisional million dollar budget to work with. While Greg focused on getting financial support from the legislature, Drew focused on the data associated with operations. He built databases by plant type to figure out costs of control and used those data to justify additional funding to make a meaningful dent

in the state's upland invasive plant problem. They employed Mark Zeller to help build consensus among the state's public land managers to figure out the most equitable way of determining funding priorities.

In retrospect, Greg said he couldn't imagine a better approach to dealing with the huge amount of upland acreage that was infested by exotic plants when they got started. It's doubtful that if the Uplands Program had been structured differently, i.e. with a "top down" dispensation of funding, it would have produced the same level of success. One of the great joys of their program's developmental years was all the networking involved. Greg, Drew and Mark were inspired and challenged by the insightful questions, opinions and suggestions of their colleagues across the state. It was encouraging for them to be able to interact with hundreds of people who were passionate about their land stewardship, who embodied a "can do" spirit and who saw a very real potential for success. Although every successful program has its naysayers and detractors, in this case, criticism was welcomed. They wanted everyone to be able to contribute to the conversation and let their opinions and suggestions be evaluated based upon their rationale and merit.

Before they retired, Drew and Greg provided data to support their contention that the State of Florida needs to spend around 20 million dollars next year to continue the

reduction of infested acres while providing evaluation and maintenance on as much of the approximately 1.5 million acres of public lands previously treated as possible. Their multi-year plan projected exponential decreases in costs and the priority focus; maintenance on the most problematic herbaceous invasives like climbing ferns, other vines such as air potato, grasses like cogon grass, and fast-growing woody invasives such as Brazilian pepper, melaleuca and Chinese tallow. They were working with other state agencies and The Nature Conservancy to match dollar for dollar the Upland Program's expenditures but for whatever reason, the legislature was unable to consider their recommendations before Drew and Greg signed off. Well, guys, you tried. We know you can't win 'em all.

My perspective is that Greg Jubinsky and Drew Leslie did more than their share of the invasive plant control heavy-lifting over the past thirty-something years and got us to where we are today. Now it's our turn. The bunch of us that still work in the Uplands Program will have to take the torch that Drew and Greg handed off to us and run hard with it to be able to leave a legacy of land stewardship anywhere near as impressive as theirs.

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